



# SHARP FACTS

## Gonorrhea



### What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a common sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, a bacterium that can grow and multiply easily in mucous membranes of the body. Gonorrhea bacteria can grow in the warm, moist areas of the reproductive tract, including the cervix (opening to the womb), uterus (womb), and fallopian tubes (egg canals) in women, and in the urethra (urine canal) in women and men. The bacteria can also grow in the mouth, throat, and anus.

Gonorrhea is a very common infectious disease. Each year approximately 650,000 people in the United States are infected with gonorrhea. People with gonorrhea can more easily contract HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Any sexually active person can be infected with gonorrhea. In the United States, approximately 75% of all reported gonorrhea is found in younger people aged 15 to 29 years. The highest rates of infection are usually found in 15- to 19-year-old women and 20- to 24-year-old men. In 1999, 77% of the total number of reported gonorrhea cases reported to the CDC occurred among African-Americans. The infection rate among African-American males aged 15-19 was 52-times higher than the rate for white males of the same age.

### How do people get gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is spread through sexual contact (vaginal, oral, or anal). This includes penis-to-vagina, penis-to-mouth, penis-to-anus, mouth-to-vagina, and mouth-to-anus contact. Ejaculation does not have to occur for gonorrhea to be transmitted or acquired. Gonorrhea can also be spread from mother to child during birth. Gonorrhea infection can spread to other unlikely parts of the body. For example, a person can get an eye infection after touching infected genitals and then the eyes. Individuals who have had gonorrhea and received treatment may get infected again if they have sexual contact with people infected with gonorrhea.

### What are the symptoms and complications of gonorrhea?

When initially infected, about 50% of **men** have some signs or symptoms. Symptoms and signs include a burning sensation when urinating and a yellowish white discharge from the penis. Sometimes men with gonorrhea get painful or swollen testicles. In men, gonorrhea can cause epididymitis, a painful condition of the testicles that can sometimes lead to infertility if left untreated. Without prompt treatment, gonorrhea can also affect the prostate and can lead to scarring inside the urethra, making urination difficult.

In **women**, the early symptoms of gonorrhea are often mild, and many women who are infected have no symptoms of infection. Even when a woman has symptoms, they can be so non-specific as to be mistaken for a bladder or vaginal infection. The initial symptoms and signs in women include a painful or burning sensation when urinating and a vaginal discharge that is yellow or bloody. Women with no or mild gonorrhea symptoms are still at risk of developing serious complications from the infection.

Untreated gonorrhea in women can develop into pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). About 1 million women each year in the United States develop PID. Women with PID do not necessarily have symptoms or signs. When symptoms or signs are present, they can be very severe and can include strong abdominal pain and fever. PID can lead to internal abscesses (pus pockets that are hard to cure), long-lasting pelvic pain, and infertility. PID can cause infertility or damage the fallopian tubes (egg canals) enough to increase the risk of ectopic pregnancy. Ectopic pregnancy is a life-threatening condition in which a fertilized egg grows outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube.

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#### How does gonorrhea affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

Gonorrhea in a pregnant woman can cause premature delivery or spontaneous abortion. The infected mother may give the infection to her infant as the baby passes through the birth canal during delivery. This can cause blindness, joint infection, or a life-threatening blood infection in the baby. Treatment of gonorrhea as soon as it is detected in pregnant women will lessen the risk of these complications. Pregnant women should consult a health care provider for appropriate medications.

#### When do symptoms appear?

In males, symptoms usually appear 2 to 7 days after infection, but it can take as long as 30 days for symptoms to begin. Regardless of symptoms, once a person is infected with gonorrhea, he or she can spread the infection to others if condoms or other protective barriers are not used during sex.

#### Is there a cure?

Many of the currently used antibiotics can successfully cure uncomplicated gonorrhea. Because many people with gonorrhea also have chlamydia, antibiotics for both infections are usually given together. Persons with gonorrhea should also be screened for other STDs. It is important to take all of the medication prescribed to cure gonorrhea, even if the symptoms or signs stop before all the medication is gone. This is especially important since gonorrhea is becoming resistant to traditional antibiotic therapy. In 1999, the Gonococcal Isolate Surveillance Project (GISP) detected decreased susceptibility to ciprofloxacin in 1.1% of isolates (14.3% in Hawaii). Persons who have had gonorrhea and have been treated can also get the disease again if they have sexual contact with an infected person.

#### What if I have gonorrhea?

Any genital symptoms such as discharge or burning during urination or unusual sore or rash should be a signal to stop having sex and to consult a health care provider immediately. If you are told you have gonorrhea or any other STD and receive treatment, you should notify all of your recent sex partners so that they can see a health care provider and be treated. This will reduce the risk that your partners will develop serious complications from gonorrhea and will reduce your own risk of becoming re-infected.

#### How can I protect myself from STDs

Not having sex is the most effective way to prevent getting an infection. Monogamy is also safe; two people who only have sex with each other are safe if neither partner is infected. For people who choose to have sex outside a monogamous relationship, a latex condom put on before beginning sex and worn until the penis is withdrawn can reduce risk. Washing the genitals, urinating, or douching after sex does not prevent STDs. For more detailed information on strategies to reduce your risk of acquiring STD/HIV see **SHARP Fact "Choosing Safer Options Reduces Risk"** at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp/shrpfact.htm>.

#### Where can I get more information?

CDC provides information through their National STD Hotline at (800) 227-8922. For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program Home Page at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

This information adapted by the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP), Directorate of Health Promotion and Population Health, Navy Environmental Health Center, Norfolk Virginia, from material developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for HIV, STD & TB Prevention, Division of STD Prevention (including STD Surveillance, 1999).